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Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The informal open-ended working group on the revitalization of the work of the General Assembly was established by the President of the Assembly at its forty-seventh session and re-established by the President of the Assembly at its forty-eighth session. Its recommendations were adopted by the Assembly in its resolutions 47/233 of 17 August 1993 and 48/264 of 29 July 1994, some of which were reaffirmed by the Assembly in resolution 51/241 of 31 July 1997.*

2. In its resolution 48/264, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report to it at its fifty-second session on the progress achieved in the implementation of the resolution after having ascertained the views and experience of the Presidents of the Assembly at its forty-ninth, fiftieth and fifty-first sessions. The present report is submitted in response to that request.

3. The views received from the Presidents of the General Assembly at its forty-ninth, fiftieth and fifty-first sessions are reproduced in the report, which also deals with the efforts of the Main Committees to rationalize and streamline their respective agendas. The report includes a brief analysis of the workload of the General Assembly with regard to three factors, namely, the number of items on the agenda, the number of resolutions adopted, and the number of reports requested of the Secretary-General, as a way of assessing whether those efforts have had a quantitative impact on the work of the General Assembly.

II. Views received from the Presidents of the General Assembly at its forty-ninth, fiftieth and fifty-first sessions

4. The views received from the Presidents of the General Assembly at its forty-ninth, fiftieth and fifty-first sessions are reproduced below.

Mr. Amara Essy, President of the General Assembly at its forty-ninth session

[Original: French]

[9 September 1997]

Having had conferred upon me by the community of States Members of the United Nations the singular honour of presiding over the forty-ninth regular session of the world body, I now feel it necessary to share the lessons learned during my term as President as a contribution to the current

* The General Assembly, in its resolution 51/241, adopted the recommendations of the Open-ended High-level Working Group on the Strengthening of the United Nations System. The report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of resolution 51/241 was circulated in document A/52/855.

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debate on the reform process, which is aimed at enhancing the effectiveness and credibility of our Organization.

In doing so, however, for reasons of practicality I will confine my comments to the General Assembly.

The General Assembly is the organ that best reflects the universal character of the United Nations, which is embodied in the sovereign equality of all Member States, and the President of the Assembly is privy to the diversity of the views of Member States. His role is also to facilitate consultations among them and to do everything within his power to promote consensus decisions that will be binding on all Members of our Organization.

From that perspective, my term of office was remarkably rich in lessons. By the conclusion of the general debate, I was able to see how, with the end of the cold war, States Members unanimously emphasized the need to embark without delay on far-reaching reforms in the structures of the Organization in order to better equip it to meet the many challenges that await it in the next millennium. Thus, after frequent and extensive consultations, I decided to establish with the agreement of all Member States three ad hoc open-ended working groups of the General Assembly on, respectively, an agenda for development, the financial situation of the Organization and the strengthening of the United Nations system. I should also mention the establishment of an ad hoc intergovernmental working group on capacity to pay.

Together, these four working groups, to which I should add the Open-ended Working Group on Security Council reform and the Informal Open-ended Working Group on an Agenda for Peace, both of which were established by my predecessor, have done very valuable work; with the passage of time, I can wholeheartedly attest to their necessity and usefulness, which indicate the increasing need to revitalize the work of the General Assembly.

Generally speaking, the increase in the number, complexity and inter-related nature of the questions submitted to the General Assembly underscores the urgent need to rationalize the work of the Assembly if it is to come up with practical, action-oriented decisions that are likely to provide acceptable solutions to problems as they arise.

Another aspect of the recent trend in the work of the General Assembly is the fact that it is virtually continuous. Indeed, while in previous decades the Assembly's work was limited to the three months of its regular session (from September to December), in recent years work has gone on throughout the year, which clearly poses a number of logistical problems in terms of financial and material resources for the Office of the President of the General Assembly and for the support services of the Secretariat. Many Member States also have great difficulty in fully participating in the various meetings, since they are ill-prepared for this new and unexpected trend.

Consequently, the suggestions which I would like to make here take account of the difficulties encountered in the work of the General Assembly during my term of office at the institutional and organizational levels and in terms of the resources that were available to me.

I. At the institutional level

A. Proliferation of ad hoc open-ended working groups and at the same time limitation of the duration of their mandates

The experience of ad hoc open-ended working groups has proved their undoubted value in the sense that they enable broad-based and in-depth consultations to take place on different topics and facilitate the implementation of the consensus decisions that result. It is for this reason that I support their establishment whenever necessary, although I wish to make it quite clear that, in order to guarantee the effectiveness of working groups, the terms of reference for their establishment should be specific and clear-cut. In particular, deadlines should be set for them to achieve their objectives so that their work will not be permanently stalled.

B. Need for greater involvement of the President of the General Assembly in the activities of the Security Council

Notwithstanding the periodic briefings which the President of the General Assembly receives from the President of the Security Council and whose usefulness is beyond question, it would nevertheless be preferable for the President of the General Assembly to be briefed on an ongoing basis on matters that are under consideration by the Council and, more particularly, on informal consultations. To this end, I suggest that a designated member of the Office of the President of the General Assembly should participate as an observer in all informal consultations of the Security Council so that the President of the General Assembly can be briefed on an ongoing basis.

II. At the organizational level

The efforts already being made to rationalize the work of the General Assembly must be pursued with the aim of ensuring greater coherence at the substantive level and more effective organizational arrangements.

A. Limitation of the number of items included in the agenda of sessions

The proliferation of items included in the agenda of sessions inevitably leads to superficial treatment of all items and does not promote the effectiveness which we all fervently seek. Indeed, it is well known that where there are too many priorities, none of them is in fact a priority.

I therefore support a more selective approach to the items to be considered that are of undeniable importance so as to achieve greater coherence in the substance of the General Assembly's work, thereby avoiding duplications and other abstractions which in no way contribute to the search for concrete solutions.

B. Need for more specific contributions to the general debate

It would be highly desirable for delegations to be encouraged more and more to focus their contributions to the general debate on developments that relate to specific aspects of the items under consideration and to put forward specific proposals that are likely to gain the support of the largest number of Member States and to be reflected in action-oriented resolutions.

C. Rationalization of the calendar of meetings

The increasing number of requests submitted to the General Assembly and the global nature of topical issues make it necessary in my view for meetings to be planned as part of a logical continuum that will permit the largest number of Member States to participate, especially those which have small delegations.

Moreover, during the period of the general debate, it would be preferable for visits by heads of State and other personalities to the Secretary-General and the President of the General Assembly to be scheduled in such a way that, as far as the President of the General Assembly is concerned, the timely start to the work of the General Assembly is not affected.

III. Need for resources

There can be no effective revitalization of the work of the General Assembly without a realistic allocation of resources to this body.

From my experience as President of the forty-ninth session of the General Assembly, I am aware of the wholly inadequate level of the resources made available to the President of the Assembly and his Office. I must also add that the support services of the General Assembly are constantly subject to severe budget cuts that have a significant adverse impact on the quality of their services, which are so important to the effective discharge of the work of the General Assembly and of the Office of the President.

Finally, as a General Assembly President from Africa, I have been particularly disappointed at the low priority given to questions relating to the development of Africa, including the United Nations New Agenda for the Development of Africa in the 1990s, during consideration of the Diversification Fund for Africa's Commodities. I also noted the unacceptable difficulties which the Secretariat support services responsible for this item encountered during that period.

In view of the foregoing, I wish to make the following suggestions for improving the situation:

A. An adequate budget should be allocated to the President of the General Assembly

As far as I could see, the resources made available to the President of the General Assembly do not permit him to discharge the increasingly demanding responsibilities required by the changing situation, namely, greater involvement in all major issues being addressed by the United Nations. Such involvement means, firstly, that he must be able to participate in an appropriate way in the various major meetings, to visit, for example, the theatres of peacekeeping operations, or quite simply to accept the invitations he receives for official visits. This obvious limitation is compounded by his inability to contract the services of experts or consultants to carry out the comprehensive studies required by certain situations, all because of the failure to allocate resources for this purpose.

The list of privations and frustrations suffered by the President of the General Asse11:21PMmbly is a long one and I do not think that it is necessary for me to engage here in polemics for the simple reason that this state of affairs is well known to all and has been fully described in the note (A/46/969) from Ambassador Shihabi of Saudi Arabia, President of the General Assembly at its forty-sixth session, from which I will quote the following extract: "The Office of the President of the General Assembly remains mostly dependent on the staff and support of the President's own government. This situation gives to the Office of the President a transitional nature, without the necessary institutional elements to enable it to play the full role envisaged for it by the membership of the United Nations – a major factor that could lead to the weakening of the General Assembly, the principal organ of the Organization.

After a full year's experience of the privilege of undertaking this responsibility, I feel more convinced than ever that the minimum framework necessary to give the Office of the President, which is at the centre of the activity of the General Assembly, the necessary continuity remains vital. I should add that for future Presidents, and within the limits of the regular budget of the United Nations, a modest financial allowance should be accorded to the President's Office to meet the needs of fulfilling basic administrative and official travel expenses and hospitality requirements, in addition to other auxiliary expenses that could accrue."

For my part, I can only affirm the appositeness and timeliness of those views and express the hope that the recommendations in question will be effectively implemented without delay, in other words, that appropriate budgetary resources will be allocated for the activities of the President and for his Office.

B. The staff and resources of the General Assembly Affairs Division should be strengthened

As everyone knows, the General Assembly Affairs Division is the main support service of the President of the General Assembly and his Office during his term of office and, in fact, it is this Division that ensures the continuity of the work of the General Assembly from one session to the next.

To call for the strengthening of this Division is to state the obvious, since it is not normal to leave to the Government of the State of which the President of the Assembly is a national the entire burden of providing the human, material and financial resources required for the proper functioning of the Office of the President. Calling for the strengthening of the Division is even more justifiable as the expansion and complexity of the tasks assigned to the President of the General Assembly make it necessary for him to have available on a continuous basis specific expert capabilities in all fields.

Consequently, and in the light of this requirement, I strongly believe that, despite the well-known situation of the current staff reduction exercise, the General Assembly Affairs Division should be substantially strengthened and, at any rate, should not suffer any reduction in staff.

C. Strengthening of the Secretariat support service responsible for development in Africa

The various United Nations priority plans and programmes for development in Africa – such as the United Nations Programme of Action for African Economic Recovery and Development, the New Agenda and, more recently, the United Nations System-wide Special Initiative for Africa – which have succeeded each other have turned out to be pious hopes that lacked practical implementation. Of course, responsibility for this situation is clear and to be equally shared by the African countries themselves, the international community and the United Nations Secretariat. With regard to the Secretariat's responsibility, I am of the view that the oft-proclaimed priority attached to the development of Africa should at least be reflected in the existence of a suitable support office equipped with the appropriate resources.

Mr. Diogo Freitas do Amaral, President of the General Assembly at its fiftieth session

[Original: English]

[8 January 1998

I. Office

Everybody in the United Nations knows well the modest and small facilities in which the President of the General Assembly has to work. This has not always been so: in 1980, for instance, I was received by the President of the General Assembly as Foreign Minister of Portugal during that year's general debate, and I remember well how large and beautifully equipped was the office of the President.

The present situation is unacceptable.

II. Staff

The present situation is good enough, with one exception.

During the whole year I was assigned the following staff: one spokesperson from the Department of Public Information; one security officer; two drivers; and two secretaries.

This is acceptable but one of the secretaries was assigned only for the period from September to December, and her assistance to my office was only extended for the rest of the year after hard discussions with the Secretariat. I think two secretaries full-time are needed for the whole year of each presidency.

III. Budget

The budget of the Office of the President is not enough, for three main reasons:

(1) Hospitality expenses cover only two working luncheons of the President with the Chairmen of the Main Committees of the General Assembly, when at least three working luncheons are necessary between September and December;

(2) Hospitality expenses do not cover working luncheons of the President with the Vice-Chairmen of the five high-level open-ended working groups on United Nations reform. Money should be provided for this essential type of work;

(3) The budget does not provide any money for official travel of the President around the world (see section IV).

IV. Official travel of the President of the General Assembly

During the fiftieth session of the General Assembly, I was officially invited to visit about a dozen countries, including Brazil, China, the Holy See, Japan, Kuwait, the Republic of Korea, the Russian Federation and Thailand.

I enquired whether there was any money available for travel expenses in the United Nations budget, as the inviting Governments only provided for accommodation and food inside their own countries. No money was available.

My country's Government offered, at my insistent request, to pay for one official travel only (I chose to visit China and Japan). No further funding was available from my Government for other travel. Therefore, I could not accept the majority of the invitations that had been extended to me.

I personally think that the President of the General Assembly should be able to make two or three official visits during his mandate, including about three countries in each one, in order to honour the invitations that are graciously extended to him. So many United Nations officers are constantly travelling at the expense of the Organization: why exclude only the President of the General Assembly?

Mr. Razali Ismail, President of the General Assembly at its fifty-first session

[Original: English]

[20 January 1998]

I. Introduction

1. The Presidency of the fifty-first session of the General Assembly, consistent with the role and powers of the President as spelled out in the rules of procedure of the General Assembly, had the following objectives:

(a) To underline the centrality of the role of the President and to enhance the image of the Presidency and the General Assembly so as to contribute towards a more positive image for the United Nations as a whole;

(b) To make General Assembly meetings, both plenary and those of subsidiary committees, function efficiently and effectively through, *inter alia*, improved working methods and regular meetings or consultations with the relevant Chairmen and Members;

(c) To help conclude the work of the various working groups devoted to different aspects of United Nations reform so that the United Nations remains relevant, especially to the needs of the peoples of the world;

(d) To promote greater transparency and facilitate the participation of more Member States in the decision-making process of the United Nations, especially on key issues such as the selection of the new Secretary-General, involvement of non-governmental bodies in the work of the United Nations, etc.;

(e) To establish close interaction between the various entities within the United Nations system, including

between the General Assembly and the Security Council as well as between the General Assembly and the Secretariat.

II. Assessment

A. General comments

2. In my closing address at the last meeting of the fifty-first session of the General Assembly, on 15 September 1997, I shared my assessment of the work done within the year and commented on the future as well. To me, the fifty-first session had been a time of knuckling down to work and more work, minimizing the ceremonials, and of concentrating creative energies to overcome political wills in discord in an effort to advance the purposes and principles of the Charter and to reform the Organization. I believed that a spirit of partnership had been forged across both sides of the house in a collective effort to modernize the United Nations for the challenges ahead.

3. Having got through the regular session with what I would like to believe was a new work culture and discarding the syndrome of "business as usual" which had resulted in a year's notional savings of $2 million, the General Assembly laboured over various aspects of reform and restructuring through the five working groups to arrive at a blueprint to "quietly revolutionize" the Organization. Reform fever aside, the year was notable also for the appointment of a new Secretary-General, the special session for the purpose of an overall review and appraisal of the implementation of Agenda 21 and the tenth emergency special session, on the question of occupied territories.

B. Working groups

4. It was a matter of some satisfaction that we managed to complete the work of the Ad Hoc Open-ended Working Group on an Agenda for Development and the Open-ended High-Level Working Group on the Strengthening of the United Nations System. Nevertheless, work on the issues pertaining to the Working Groups on the financial situation, an Agenda for Peace and the restructuring of the Security Council remained unfinished.

5. A comprehensive package to reform the Security Council remained a tantalizing prospect but countries had first to comprehend the universal aspirations for change in a United Nations mired in ways of governance that are less than democratic. I had tried without partisanship – even if a few would not believe me – and with a mixture of caution and innovation, to eke out a mainstream position on the reform of the Security Council, and to provide a blueprint of how this might be done. The proposals remain on the table to be taken up by interested States and brought to final conclusion.

6. The most disappointing and perhaps the most crucial piece of unfinished business of the fifty-first session was the continuing stalemate over the issue of payment of arrears and of restoring fiscal stability to the Organization. The financial crippling of the United Nations continued to obstruct the momentum for reform, preventing constructive negotiations for genuine reform of the Organization. Arguments about complicated legislative procedures, attaching arbitrary conditions to payments and using the media to cast a different version did not reduce what is simply a solemn treaty obligation. Blind unilateralism would be the undoing of the United Nations.

C. Special session on Agenda 21

7. International cooperation, exercised nationally, globally and in partnership with other stakeholders, came to a serious impasse at the special session. Governments could not even agree to a political declaration that would honestly assess our record on implementing the commitments undertaken at the Rio Conference. The bare-boned outcome of the session, neither set new targets nor catalysed resources for programmes, even when the subject of sustainable development held enormous appeal for Governments and public alike. The special session was telling in its illustration of the inability of the United Nations to grapple with the failure of Governments, marginalized as a norm-setting institution and too weak to convert consensus into material and tangible terms. With official development assistance in decline and the political leverage of transnational business and industry in the ascendant, the United Nations runs the serious risk of being relegated to dealing only with the "soft" issues and not the "hard" issues of development. Equally, there are lessons to be learned in our approach to determining the results of other global conferences.

D. Non-governmental organizations

8. The participation of non-governmental organizations in the special session was a milestone event. However, it is one of my disappointments that the wider issue of non-governmental organization participation in the work of the

United Nations remains unresolved. Despite extensive efforts to clarify and move the issue forward in the subgroup on non-governmental organizations, the intransigence of a few and the politicization of the subject did not even allow the subgroup to agree on its mandate. A mix of governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental voices in the United Nations would reflect reality more closely than a sovereign State-dominated United Nations, giving it added legitimacy. The proposed people's assembly cannot be a substitute for the role of non-governmental organizations in the decision-making process of the United Nations.

E. Emergency special session

9. Twice this year the General Assembly, on an issue impacting on international peace and security, took up the question of illegal Israeli actions in occupied East Jerusalem and the rest of the occupied Palestinian territory given the inability of the Security Council to act as a result of veto by a permanent member. I would recommend seeking greater recourse in the General Assembly through the resolution entitled "Uniting for peace" [resolution 377 A (V)] for those Members who cannot find due justice in the Security Council.

F. Appointment of the Secretary-General

10. In the final days of the regular session, the General Assembly and the Presidency responded effectively and played an impartial and constructive role in the selection of Secretary-General, when assertive unilateralism provoked deadlock in the Security Council and threatened to undermine the integrity of the institution of the United Nations itself. There was close interaction between the President of the Security Council and the President of the General Assembly, who was accompanied to these consultations by five Vice-Presidents of the General Assembly (representing the five regions), as well as the Chairmen of the regional groups. Changes were introduced to the resolution appointing the Secretary-General as well as to the ceremony in the General Assembly where the Secretary-General was sworn in.

III. Future

A. Overview

11. We have a long way to go if we are to replace our narrow and unhelpful "à la carte approach" to United Nations reforms with a comprehensive one. The Secretary-General's reform proposal deserves our full and expeditious attention without being casualty to politics. The task of strengthening the United Nations would depend in large part on its ability to adapt to change, beyond creeping incremental adjustments. This would not be easy of course as we do not yet share a common premise of what constitutes reform.

12. Every aspect of the United Nations remains a stake and a prize in the escalating debate between the North and the South, particularly in a world where one super-Power dominates; each side with conflicting claims on fundamental values and perspectives, causing political gridlock in virtually every aspect of reform. While it is evident in the governmental and Secretariat contexts that major countries place a high premium on the fact that reform should not in any manner affect their rights, prerogatives and status, developing countries on the other hand lack capacity and are often disunited, overly stressing at times form over substance, even as their negotiating power declines and the coherence of other political groupings strengthen.

13. The United Nations would not be strengthened if reform concentrated only on cost-effectiveness, efficiency and better coordination. Such objectives alone would divert attention from the real functions of the United Nations and its responsibilities under the Charter. If the United Nations is to survive, it has to transform itself from an organization serving only the interests of States, especially the powerful, to one serving the interests of all, especially the peoples living in an interdependent and interconnected globalizing society.

14. As President, I had also devoted substantial effort towards interacting with the world outside the United Nations, keeping my door open not only to governmental representatives but also to non-governmental organizations, students, the business community, universities and journalists in equal measure. I have also gone to witness suffering and deprivation on the ground by visiting refugee camps, even if I could not take up the many invitations from various Governments. Far from being an exercise in winning popularity, this had been a serious attempt to explain multilateralism and role of the United Nations – its purposes,

inner workings, strengths and contradictions – in plain terms, without fanfare or rhetorics.

B. Specific recommendations

15. I fully share the views expressed by the President of the forty-sixth session of the General Assembly, Ambassador Samir Shihabi, who stated (A/46/969):

> "After a full year's experience of the privilege of undertaking this responsibility, I feel more convinced than ever that the minimum framework necessary to give the Office of the President, which is at the centre of the activity of the General Assembly, the necessary continuity remains vital. I should add that for future Presidents, and within the limits of the regular budget of the United Nations, a modest financial allowance should be accorded to the President's Office to meet the needs of fulfilling basic administrative and official travel expenses and hospitality requirements, in addition to other auxiliary expenses that could accrue."

Indeed, one outcome of the Working Group on the Strengthening of the United Nations System was the adoption by the General Assembly of resolution 51/241, paragraph 44 of the annex which reads:

> "In order to assist the President in the discharge of his responsibilities, the General Assembly shall request the Secretary-General, after consultation with the President, to include in the next programme budget a proposal for adequate resources to be made available to the President, including, if necessary, through enhanced administrative and personnel support to the office of the President."

Accordingly, on 5 August 1997, I wrote a letter to the Secretary-General stating that "in the light of the terms of paragraphs 1 and 3 of resolution 51/241 and of paragraph 44 of its annex, I wish to suggest that our relevant officers meet soon to ensure the inclusion in the programme budget for the biennium 1998-1999 of provisions for adequate resources to be made available to the President of the General Assembly and his office". This is particularly important as the budget for 1998-2000 would be taken up during October-December 1997.

16. I strongly believe in a need for a distinct and full-time entity for the Office of the President considering the year-round and increased work of the Assembly. The office should include:

(a) A Professional level officer;

(b) A spokesperson;

(c) Two secretaries;

(d) Security personnel (although I did not avail myself of one on a full-time basis, thanks to the generosity of my Government);

(e) Car and driver, (although I did not avail myself of one on a full-time basis, thanks again to the generosity of the Government of Malaysia);

(f) Allocation for some modest working breakfasts or luncheons and dinners;

(g) Appropriate office space, including specific meeting-room facilities.

17. I also believe that there is a need to promote more transparent and regular consultations between the Security Council and the General Assembly, where the President of the Assembly could be accompanied by a representative number of Vice-Presidents and Chairmen of regional groups.

18. As for the work of the General Assembly, I think it is timely that all the Vice-Presidents of the General Assembly, irrespective of status in the Security Council, be requested to assist in the work of General Assembly meetings, including presiding at meetings.

19. Another proposal which could be considered would be the organizing of an annual meeting of the heads of the principal organs of the United Nations, at the beginning of each session of the General Assembly, to exchange views on current issues at the session.

20. I cannot but emphasize the need to work closely with the Chairmen of the Main Committees. Regular meetings were essential. Although there were Chairmen of Main Committees who were not Permanent Representatives and who acquitted themselves well, I do believe that it would be useful for Member States to consider ensuring that all Chairmen of Main Committees are at the level of Permanent Representatives to underscore the importance attached to the work of the Committees.

III. Review by the Main Committees of their respective agendas

5. In its resolution 48/264, the General Assembly, *inter alia*, commended the valuable work undertaken by the Main Committees to review their respective agendas, encouraged the Committees to continue that work, and adopted the

Guidelines on the Rationalization of the Agenda of the General Assembly set forth in annex I to the resolution. Paragraph 5 of the Guidelines contains specific recommendations concerning the review by the Main Committees of their respective agendas, relating to the merging of items or their incorporation as sub-items, the consideration of related matters in agreed clusters, and the biennialization and triennialization of items.

First Committee

The rationalization of the work of the First Committee has been the subject of discussion since the thirty-ninth session of the General Assembly. A number of its Chairmen have made every effort to deal with the urgent and relevant issues concerning the rationalization by rearranging the agenda and improving the functioning of the Committee.

7. Right from the outset, a two-track approach was adopted for the reform of the First Committee, one track targeting the substantive aspects of the issue and the other the procedural aspects. While the attempt to streamline the international disarmament agenda in general, and the agenda of the First Committee in particular, encountered difficulties, the introduction of procedural changes proved to be more feasible.

8. At the forty-eighth session, in its resolution 48/87 of 16 December 1993, the General Assembly adopted a thematic approach, whereby items allocated to the First Committee would be clustered into 10 broad topic areas, including nuclear weapons; other weapons of mass destruction; conventional weapons; regional disarmament and security; outer space; and international security. The consideration of disarmament issues, including an informal discussion and action on draft resolutions, followed this clustering at the forty-ninth, fiftieth and fifty-first sessions and has been somewhat improved.

9. Also at the forty-eighth session, the Chairman of the First Committee circulated a working paper (A/C.1/48/9) with a view to providing a framework for a comprehensive approach to all items allocated to the Committee. In it, the Committee was encouraged to further discuss the practical integration of disarmament and international security issues. As a result of extensive consultations, the disarmament and international security issues have been considered since that session, in an integrated manner by the First Committee throughout all three phases of its work, namely, general debate; thematic discussion, consideration of and action on those items.

10. Moreover, as a result of the recommendation of the General Assembly to consider the biennialization and triennialization of some items allocated to the Main Committees, the First Committee decided to consider some items on its agenda in two-, three- or even four-year cycles, such as those relating to the role of science and technology in the context of international security and disarmament; new types of weapons of mass destruction and new systems of such weapons; the question of Antarctica; Disarmament Week; the United Nations Disarmament Information Programme; and verification in all its aspects.

11. Furthermore, in complying with the recommendation of the General Assembly that agenda items concerning issues of closely related substance could be merged within a single agenda title, the First Committee has decided to merge the item entitled "Reduction of military budgets" and the item relating to objective information on military matters under the title "Reduction of military budgets". It has merged two items concerning security assurances into one item with an agreed title. It was also decided that the Committee will continue to look into the possibility of merging similar items at the fifty-second session of the General Assembly. The First Committee intends to resume its work early in July 1998 to continue its consideration of the question of the rationalization of its work and reform of its agenda and also to consider the request contained in paragraph 37 of the annex to resolution 51/241, namely that the Disarmament Commission should continue to consider ways to organize its work better, including rationalizing the duration of its sessions.

Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee)

12. By its resolution 47/233, the General Assembly established the Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee) by merging the former Special Political Committee and Fourth (Decolonization) Committee. Consequently, since the forty-eighth session, the work programme of the Fourth Committee combines the agendas of those two Committees.

13. In an effort to improve and rationalize its work to the fullest extent possible and constructively utilize the time and conference facilities available to it, the Committee has clustered all its agenda items related to decolonization and held a single general debate on them.

14. The remaining items allocated to the Fourth Committee, in view of their diverse nature, were considered

individually during the last three sessions of the General Assembly, although efforts have been made to ensure maximum use of conference facilities by scheduling, when possible, several items for consideration at the same meeting.

15. In addition, the Fourth Committee has made every effort to eliminate agenda items on which no action has been taken in recent years. For example, during its forty-ninth and fifty-first sessions, on the recommendation of the Committee, the General Assembly decided to delete from its agenda the items entitled "Science and peace" and "Question of the composition of the relevant organs of the United Nations" (decisions 49/418 and 51/429).

Second Committee

16. The Second Committee began clustering items on its agenda as from the fortieth session. In recent years the agenda of the Second Committee has undergone a series of modifications pursuant to the provisions of General Assembly resolution 50/227 of 24 May 1996 and other resolutions adopted by the Assembly under the item entitled "Restructuring and revitalization of the United Nations in the economic, social and related fields", *inter alia*, through biennialization and triennialization of the consideration of items and sub-items. As a result, at the fifty-first session, the agenda was organized into 7 broad items with 21 sub-items.

17. The restructuring of the agenda explains the sharp drop in the number of resolutions adopted by the General Assembly on the recommendation of the Second Committee, from 41 at the fiftieth session to 28 at the fifty-first session. In most, although not all cases, their length – in particular of preambular parts – was reduced, in conformity with resolution 50/227. The Committee considers that more use should be made of the possibilities offered by combining different resolutions and increasing the number of so-called omnibus resolutions.

18. The Second Committee to build on other aspects of resolution 50/227, particularly with regard to the rationalization and improvement of its methods of work. For instance, the duration of the sessions of the Second Committee has been reduced to eight weeks.

Third Committee

19. At the forty-fifth session the Third Committee established an open-ended working group to consider appropriate ways and means of rationalizing its work. The recommendations of the Third Committee and the Working Group were endorsed by the General Assembly in resolution 45/175 of 18 December 1990 and subsequently in resolution 46/140 of 17 December 1991, and further recommendations were approved annually thereafter. Over this period, the Committee developed a set of guidelines which established a revised structure of its agenda and took a number of decisions relating to precise annualization, biennialization, triennialization and quinquennialization of reports and submission of proposals. At the end of every session, the Committee devotes one or two meetings to a full discussion of its agenda and measures to improve its modus operandi.

20. The agenda of the Third Committee is organized in two clusters, namely, social and related issues; and human rights and related issues. In many cases, particularly with regard to many human rights issues, it is not possible for the Committee to recommend further clustering, merging or biennialization of reports or substantive legislation. For other questions, such as crime and drugs, the advancement of women and the follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women, the elimination of racism and the right of peoples to self-determination, the Committee has decided to create subsidiary groupings by joining kindred subjects and discussing them together. These linkages have been useful, particularly with subjects such as crime and drugs. Although delegations are free to make separate statements on individual items, more often they choose not to do so and the debate is shortened.

21. Finally, an additional measure taken by the Third Committee is to encourage the drafting of comprehensive or omnibus resolutions for certain major issues which lend themselves to the development of a set of mutually supporting actions in a single text.

Fifth Committee

22. Since the adoption of resolution 48/264, the Fifth Committee has been making every effort to conduct its business in accordance with the guidelines annexed to that resolution. However, delays in the availability of needed documentation continue to seriously hamper the work of the Committee. At the forty-ninth session, in his note on possible ways of improving the work of the Fifth Committee (A/C.5/49/CRP.4/Rev.1), the Chairman reflected the constraints facing the Committee as follows:

> "The efficiency and efficacy of the work of the Fifth Committee is dependent in large part on the quality, usefulness and timeliness of the reports and the assistance provided by the Secretariat, the

Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, the Committee for Programme and Coordination, the Board of Auditors, the Joint Inspection Unit, the International Civil Service Commission, the Pension Board and the Committee on Contributions. In order not to duplicate questions and discussions on technical matters, it is of utmost importance that the Committee is able to rely on the technical competence of these subsidiary organs, which should enable the Committee to endorse their recommendations. A better response to the needs of the Committee would be obtained by improved coordination procedures."

23. At the same session, the Chairman of the Fifth Committee initiated the process of the rationalization of the work of the Committee as a follow-up to the implementation of General Assembly resolution 46/220 of 20 December 1991. Unfortunately, the attempt failed since the Committee was unable to agree to all the provisions of a draft resolution proposed by the Chairman on the matter. In that draft resolution, it was proposed that the General Assembly would decide that the bureau of the Fifth Committee should, in consultation with the secretariat of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions as early as practicable during the regular session, submit, for approval by the Fifth Committee, a programme of work for both the main part of the regular session and for the resumed sessions, and that, once approved, any delays in reporting by the Secretary-General or the Advisory Committee should be reported immediately to the Chairman of the Fifth Committee who would in turn report thereon to the Committee at its next formal meeting.

24. Since the situation did not improve, the General Assembly, on the recommendation of the Fifth Committee, in paragraph 93 of section III of resolution 52/220 of 22 December 1997, decided to undertake during its resumed fifty-second session a thorough review of the working methods of the Fifth Committee, with a view to rationalizing them and initiating efficiency measures that might enable the Committee to accomplish its task on time without resorting to extra meetings at night and weekends.

25. The Fifth Committee held four informal meetings presided by its Chairman, at which it considered in a comprehensive manner questions relating, *inter alia*, to the organization of its work, the role of the Bureau and measures to ensure the timely issuance of documentation. A working paper presented by the Chairman is still under discussion. On the proposal of the Chairman, the Committee decided to continue its consideration of those issues during the second part of its resumed fifty-second session with a view to proposing concrete recommendations.

Sixth Committee

26. The Sixth Committee has already taken, at the forty-ninth, fiftieth and fifty-first sessions of the General Assembly, actions tending to the deletion or postponement *sine die*, biennialization, triennialization or quadrennialization, as well as the merging, of certain items of its agenda.

27. At the forty-ninth session, upon the recommendation of the Sixth Committee, the items entitled "Observer status of national liberation movements recognized by the Organization of African Unity and/or by the League of Arab States" and "Request for an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice" were postponed *sine die*, the General Assembly deciding to give further consideration to those questions at a future session (decisions 49/423 and 49/424).

28. Also at the forty-ninth session, upon the recommendation of the Sixth Committee, the General Assembly decided to resume consideration only at its fifty-second session of the item entitled "Convention on jurisdictional immunities of States and their property", which had been included in the agenda of the two previous sessions (resolution 49/61).

29. At its fifty-first session, the General Assembly decided to resume consideration of the item entitled "Progressive development of the principles and norms of international law relating to the new international economic order" four years later, namely at its fifty-fifth session (decision 51/441).

30. The item entitled "Draft guiding principles for international negotiations" proposed by the Permanent Representative of Mongolia (A/52/141) has been incorporated into the agenda of the General Assembly as a sub-item of the item entitled "United Nations Decade of International Law".

31. There is every expectation that in the future the Sixth Committee will continue to take actions tending to implement the objectives of General Assembly resolution 48/264.

IV. Workload of the General Assembly

32. Despite some success in the rationalization and streamlining of its agenda, in particular as concerns the

clustering, biennialization, triennialization or even quadrennialization of some agenda items, the General Assembly has not achieved a reduction of its overall workload over the last three regular sessions. Three indicators were used as the basis for the preparation of tables 1, 2 and 3, namely, the number of items on the agenda of each session and their allocation; the number of resolutions adopted by the General Assembly; and the number of reports requested of the Secretary-General.

33. As can be seen in table 1, the number of items on the agenda of the General Assembly at the forty-ninth, fiftieth and fifty-first sessions has not decreased. Efforts made by the Main Committees to rationalize their respective agendas have not translated into a dramatic reduction of the number of items allocated to them. The workload of the plenary meetings has further increased as debates on some of the items allocated to Main Committees are held directly in plenary meetings.

34. In paragraph 5 of resolution 48/264, the General Assembly encouraged Member States to exercise restraint in making proposals requesting new reports of the Secretary-General, bearing in mind the desirability of reducing the number of such reports. However, a slight decrease in the number of resolutions adopted by the General Assembly over the last three regular sessions, from 328 at the forty-ninth session to 311 at the fifty-first session, has not translated into a corresponding reduction in the number of reports requested of the Secretary-General: 283 reports of the Secretary-General were issued at the forty-ninth session, 288 at the fiftieth session and 286 at the fifty-first session.

Table 1
Allocation of agenda items

	Number of items[a]							
Session	*Plenary*	*First Committee*	*Fourth Committee*	*Second Committee*	*Third Committee*	*Fifth Committee*	*Sixth Committee*	*Total*
Forty-ninth	61	22	18	8	12	35	14	164
Fiftieth	69	25	15	11	12	36	11	169
Fifty-first	68	22	15	7	13	38	12	168

[a] The combined figures corresponding to the number of items allocated to plenary meetings and the Main Committees are higher than the totals appearing in the last column as some items have split allocation.

Table 2
Resolutions adopted

		On the recommendation of						
Session	*Without reference to a Main Committee*	*First Committee*	*Fourth Committee*	*Second Committee*	*Third Committee*	*Fifth Committee*	*Sixth Committee*	*Total*
Forty-ninth	73	44	28	46	71	52	14	328
Fiftieth	76	46	24	41	64	61	13	325
Fifty-first	73	46	28	28	63	59	14	311

Table 3
Reports of the Secretary-General

Session	*Number of reports*
Forty-ninth	283
Fiftieth	288
Fifty-first	286

V. Conclusions

35. The views received from the Presidents of the General Assembly at its forty-ninth, fiftieth and fifty-first sessions will be brought to the attention of future Presidents.

36. As indicated in paragraph 34 of the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of General Assembly resolution 51/241 (A/52/855), a provision of $250,000 per year for the office of the President of the Assembly was proposed and subsequently approved in the programme budget for the biennium 1998-1999. This amount is in addition to those resources already included in the budget for the President during his tenure. Existing resources include a spokesperson, security officers, drivers, two secretaries and hospitality funds.

37. The provision in resolution 48/264 concerning the pattern of election of the six Chairmen of the Main Committees has been implemented since the forty-ninth session.

38. By resolutions 47/233 and 48/264, the General Assembly revised its rules of procedure. As indicated in the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of resolution 51/241, the implementation of some of the provisions concerning the organization and the work of the General Assembly requires that several of its rules of procedure be amended and that the Assembly take decisions to that effect. Therefore, a revised edition of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly will not be issued until such decisions have been taken.